

Wellspring: Poetry for the Journey

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A weekly poetry resource
from St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, Richmond, Virginia



Bathing

I have been alone with the thing itself.
The depression. The defective heart. God.

Inside my mind it is dawn. A wolf appears with a bird
in its mouth. Blue feathers, my fate, the beautiful white throat.

Allison Seay¹

✧ Reflections

Today's *Wellspring* marks the 75th edition of this publication. What's more: April is National Poetry Month! There is much to celebrate and, this week, I've chosen (self-indulgently, I know) a poem from my own collection, *To See the Queen*.

The short version of the story concerning the book is that I was at one time quite ill, psychotically sad, and had what doctors called a "break," in which I hallucinated a figure and had difficulty navigating reality; the line between what was real and what was not became dangerously blurred. The poems that would eventually become the manuscript attempted to chronicle the emotional arc of that experience in an attempt to understand something of it; eventually, I learned to surrender to a truth most of us must learn to accept sooner or later: that there are some experiences in our lives that cannot be explained, much less understood ourselves. My illness, now years past, and the recovery from it, will likely always be one of the most profoundly mysterious things I have endured.

Of course, I hope my work does more than simply revel (or wallow) in my private psychic world. I think that when poetry works the best, it is because the art has invoked something particular—in this case, one woman's suffering—in order to transcend it, and that in that transcendence one is invited into larger questions about the human condition, about invisible things (despair, mercy, faith, love), and about how we interpret the world in which we exist. Whether my own poems are successful in doing that, I cannot say.

But as far as this one goes, I can speak to the simultaneous and particular luxury and vulnerability of the bath; that is, when one is most relaxed or most unaware, one is also in some position of danger, of exposure. Illness, especially an invisible mental illness, feels twinned to this kind of surrender. In my case, I was at the mercy of those who could help

¹ "Bathing" by Allison Seay from *To See the Queen*, Persea Books.

me. And my being cared for—my *choosing* to be cared for—meant also that I forfeited some control.

The Chinese have a saying that in order to tame the beast one must first make it beautiful. I don't know that I made my illness beautiful, but I do feel that by looking into the face of it—the most vulnerable white throat of it—and by naming it as illness and breakage, I did somehow repair myself or at least move toward healing. There is a gothic or grotesque beauty to the image of a wolf with a bird in its mouth: one paradox of the natural world is that it can be cruel and violent without sacrificing any of its loveliness. There is a curious lesson in observing such a paradox, one that restores my capacity for amazement.

It could be that what frustrates a writer is also what frustrates a person of faith: the idea that one can never say nor see it all (whatever “it” is), may never get it quite right or fully contained, and the pen hand will never know the soul. But this is the very frustration, on a different day, that can wholly inspire us. At their core, poems are reminders over and over that our existence is indeed a marvel, a miracle. They allow us to acknowledge the fullness of things, to make meaning, to ask questions, to become more generous, more elastic, more awake, more expansive human beings.

✧ About the poet

Allison Seay is a poet, the Associate for Religion and the Arts at St. Stephen's Episcopal Church, and the author of *Wellspring*. She studied at Mary Washington College and the University of North Carolina at Greensboro and has taught at the high school and college levels. Allison, who has been a National Endowment for the Arts fellow, is at work on a second collection of poems.



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